

Does the Universe have a Purpose?



Owen Gingerich

Yes. Frankly, I am psychologically incapable of believing that the universe is meaningless. I believe the universe has a purpose, and our greatest intellectual challenge as human beings is to glimpse what this purpose might be.

My belief is not the result of a blinding flash of a road-to-Damascus revelation. Nor is it the imprint of a nurturing home environment. Kindergartners in their simplicity ask many profound questions, but the purpose of the universe is rarely among them. Maturing teenagers in their angst may ask, “What’s the meaning of it all?” The question is existential, but the answer is subtle. Understanding emerges not in thunder, earthquake and fire, but in the still small voice of the universe itself.

Quite possibly, the purpose of the universe is to provide a congenial home for self-conscious creatures who can ask profound questions and who can probe the nature of the universe itself.

Only gradually did I come to appreciate how magnificently tuned the universe is for the emergence of intelligent life. Carbon atoms, with their self-bonding properties, provide the immense variety for the complex cellular machinery—no other atom offers a comparable range of possibilities. But carbon did not emerge from the big bang of creation. It was slowly produced, over billions of years, in the cores of evolving stars. Had some of the basic constants of nature been only slightly different, there would be no major abundance of carbon. And it is extremely difficult to imagine intelligent life without something like carbon.

One swallow does not a summer make. But in the fine-tuning of the universe, the abundance of carbon is only one

of many such remarkable aspects. There are enough such “coincidences” to give thoughtful observers some pause. Scientists who are loath to accept a fine-tuned universe feel obliged to take notice. Of course, if the universe were any other way, we wouldn’t be here to observe it, but that is hardly a satisfying answer.

Suppose, however, that there are myriad universes, each with different properties. In that case we would naturally be found in the universe that, like the little bear’s porridge, is just right. Those other barren universes, many with no stars or planets, would exist in their own forever unobservable space. Somehow this is an unpersuasive counter-argument. Even one congenial universe out of many would be miracle enough.

In the deep mystery of God’s vast creative experiment there may be many facets that we, in human terms, would relate to as purposes of the universe. I believe that, incredibly, this includes the creator’s self-revelation through human intelligence and personalities. With God’s experiment comes the freedom of choice, and I choose to believe in a purposeful universe.

My thoughtful atheistic friends who deny that the universe has any ultimate meaning are also men and women of faith. Perhaps intimidated by intimations of design, they seek to understand the universe in other ways. Ironically, they themselves may well be part of the purpose of the universe.

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